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The ambiguity and the knowledge dimension of tolerance

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Short lecture at the AMCIS/LLAKES conference on Citizenship education at ÖREBRO UNIVERSITET in Sweden in June 2016.

Citizenship education is one of the main subjects of our research in Ethics of Education at the University of Groningen.

Deliberating on teaching tolerance can illustrate the practical relevance of what we do, although we are philosophers of education.

I will discuss two characteristics of tolerance and consider the consequences for teaching tolerance.

Exploration of systematic and historical literature reveals that we can distinguish four kinds of motivation for tolerance:

1. Epistemic motivation: the insight that there is no ultimate truth. Or that there is no one single or superior access to the truth. This is the Socratic idea of tolerance. Tolerance is an important virtue because everyone's serious pursuit of the truth is of equal worth.
2. Strategic motivation: (a) tolerance to facilitate the oppression of others, *repressive* tolerance, or (b) to safeguard oneself from oppression by others, *defensive* tolerance, or (c) to secure the peaceful co-existence of different ways of thinking and living, *pluralistic* tolerance.
3. Moral motivation, for instance: tolerance as benevolence, respect, modesty, strength of character or patience (in the face of adversity or fate).

Out of benevolence: wanting the best for the other; accepting him as he is. Out of respect: appreciating the other's convictions. Out of modesty: the opposite of being stubborn and headstrong. Tolerance as strength of character: not allowing oneself to be carried away by emotions and impulses; exercising self-control. As patience: reconciling oneself with what happens, with the circumstances, the conditions, the facts of living; accepting reality, even if it means suffering and involves injustice.

4. Religious motivation: (a) the belief that only authentic faith is possible or desirable (that faith doesn't fit with coercion) and (b) the belief that God is the sole judge of others' faith.

This is the classic Christian idea of tolerance. (a) Faith can only be genuine or true if it is sincere, one's own, personal, unforced.

And (b) only God can and may judge the quality of a person's faith, for instance whether it is truly one's own. Tolerance is the logical consequence.

Four kinds of motivation. Each kind of motivation emphasises a different aspect or meaning of tolerance.

The diversity of motivations makes tolerance a complicated educational goal. It raises the question which of the motivations we want our students to develop and how to choose and justify this specific direction.

Or do we want the students to develop *all* the motivations? And if so: is that possible? Would it not be self-contradictory, to develop all? And would it be sensible in the context of citizenship education? For example, how is tolerance as patience compatible with citizenship as active political concern and participation; impatience towards injustice?

I have no answer. But I do have more questions.

Interestingly, specific cases of tolerance may be prompted by various motivations.

For example: many Muslim students in the NL expressly disapprove of homosexuality. As a teacher, I might reject their view, but tolerate it. I might tolerate it for different reasons, and for different reasons at the same time.

Because I care about these students; things are hard enough for them nowadays. I don't want to blame or incriminate them. So, my tolerance is out of benevolence.

And at the same time: because I do not want to antagonise them; to estrange them; it would impede, hinder their integration or assimilation. So, my tolerance towards their condemnation of homosexuality, is partly functional, repressive tolerance.

At the same time my tolerance can be partly an outcome of my patience: I am at peace with the sad fact that there are many people with stupid and harmful opinions.

And, at the same time, I can tolerate it, because I realise that my strong conviction --the equal worthiness of sexual orientations-- is indeed a conviction, just a conviction. So, I also tolerate the opinions of the students, partly, for epistemic reasons.

But although I could have four and maybe more kinds of reasons to tolerate their disapproval of homosexuality, and could be ready to do so, to tolerate it, I still could have my doubts. Shouldn't I be *intolerant* towards their disapproval? For their disapproval is a kind of intolerance and it seems contradictory to tolerate intolerance.

This is a core problem of tolerance:

To what extent is it permissible or necessary to tolerate convictions or behavior that are, in themselves, intolerant?

And what does this mean for teaching tolerance?

This is not philosophical hairsplitting. Many Muslim and orthodox Protestant students disapprove of homosexuality. Some Dutch students make fun of the Ramadan. Some Muslim students play down or deny the Holocaust. It happens in our schools. And it has its roots in firm convictions.

Should we teach in such a way that students learn to tolerate such intolerance from others or should we teach in such a way that they learn to not tolerate such intolerance? In my opinion we should teach in such a way that students can learn how to decide such questions for themselves. And it is not an easy job, this deciding. It can get rather complicated.

In the Netherlands, once a year we observe two minutes' silence to commemorate the victims of war. During this commemoration, we

often witness that young people ignore the two-minutes' silence and indifferently carry on talking or listening to music or even making music, showing no respect or regard for others' deep sensitivities. I am sure we don't have to tolerate this kind of intolerance. And I presume students can easily learn to come to this same conclusion.

But what about the following case? In the week after the terrorist attacks in Paris last year, the victims were remembered with a minute's silence, also in our schools. This commemoration was disturbed by a minority of students at many vocational secondary schools, not out of indifference, disrespect or unruliness, but as a form of protest. They thought it unfair to commemorate a hundred and thirty European victims of radical Muslim violence, while the numerous Muslim victims of the violence in the Middle-East are never commemorated. These students were intolerant towards the commemorators by conviction. Should we, contrary to indifferent or unruly intolerance, do tolerate this kind of intolerance? Maybe.

It can become even more complicated. In the Netherlands, as is the case elsewhere, various groups, including students, protest against headscarves, that is, Muslim women, including students and teachers, wearing headscarves. I'm inclined to not tolerate this protest, not to be tolerant towards this intolerance towards Muslims. However, these protests against headscarves reveal political commitment and sometimes reveal a concern for women's rights: it can be seen as protests against intolerance towards women who would prefer to live without a headscarf. This raises the question whether I may or must be intolerant towards intolerance towards intolerance? I am not sure. But this does strengthen me in my opinion that we should teach in such a way that students learn how to discriminate between kinds or instances of intolerance: what kinds of intolerance are not to be tolerated and what kinds of intolerance are; what instances of intolerance are not to be tolerated and what instances of intolerance are?

All these problems bring me to something else the literature shows, besides the diversity of motivations: that tolerance is more than self-control and modesty. It is not merely an emotional competence and disposition. It is also being able to judge when and when not tolerance is appropriate. Therefore, tolerance requires insight and knowledge. Tolerance has a knowledge dimension.

In the case of strategically motivated tolerance, it is obvious. Tolerance is necessary in order to avoid conflict and reduce discontentment, but at the same time tolerance encourages conflict and discontentment. The constitutional freedom of religion is a good example. Every religious denomination is granted space. That ensures peaceful co-existence. But it also creates a breeding ground for orthodoxy and radicalism, illiberalism and intolerance. Where is the critical threshold between enough and too much tolerance? It requires insight and knowledge in order to make adequate judgements, in order to determine where the boundary lies. That applies at the formal and public level of the constitution, but also on an everyday and personal level. One of my five daughters once had a *bad* boyfriend: selfish, stubborn, narrow-minded. She had taken pity on the boy: she thought he would adapt, would allow himself to be re-educated. Therefore, she tolerated some of his bad ways, to maintain his loyalty and trust (repressive tolerance). But she had to constantly remain alert to the critical boundary. His selfishness, stubbornness and narrow-mindedness obviously might also turn against her. Determining such limits and guarding them requires insight and knowledge.

In morally motivated toleration the knowledge dimension is at least as important. For instance toleration prompted by benevolence. We are aware of the pain and risks involved in the circumcision of boys, but we tolerate the practice because it is a matter of essential importance to Jews and Muslims. This tolerance may arise from love towards fellow men. It is so dear to Jewish and Muslim parents, this traditional ritual, and it is so inextricably linked to their love of their

children, that our tolerance comes easy, as an instance of benevolence. But we do not show the same tolerance towards girls' circumcision. Why not? Because we know the pain and risks and consequences of girls' circumcision are graver than those of boys' circumcision. We adapt our tolerance in accordance with our knowledge of the differences between boys' circumcision and girls' circumcision. Tolerance obviously requires insight and knowledge. Once again, this does not only apply at the level of legislation and public morals, but also on an everyday personal level. When she was fifteen, another one of my daughters had a best friend, a teenage girl like herself, who had peculiar ideas regarding physical beauty: girls ought to be super slim. My daughter tolerated the extreme opinion and also the associated behaviour, because her friend was dear to her: it's her ideal, her life and her body, so my daughter thought; it's up to her. However, this tolerance based on benevolence started to get risky when the friend began to exhibit anorexia-type features. Where is the limit to tolerance for the sake of benevolence? Of course there is a boundary. It requires knowledge and insight to adequately determine this: to judge when and when not tolerance is appropriate.

Epistemically and religiously motivated toleration cannot do without knowledge either. An example: Orthodox Jehovah's Witnesses have something against blood transfusion. This sometimes causes problems for doctors, nurses and other medical professionals. When such a Jehovah's Witness needs a blood transfusion, should his beliefs be respected and hence his refusal tolerated? When the person in question is an adult, things are difficult enough, but relatively simple: it is his belief, his truth, his body, his life. So leave him be. When it is a young child, it is also relatively clear-cut: the parents can protest until they drop, but it's their faith, not necessarily that of their children. In this kind of situation parents are over-ruled. Things get trickier in the case of young people from the ages of eleven or twelve onwards. If they refuse a blood transfusion themselves, based on their faith ... Must we, may we tolerate this?

The key question is whether it is indeed their own belief. Whether the belief is authentic. It requires knowledge to determine this. All kinds of knowledge: in any case biographical and psychological knowledge. In the Netherlands this matter is subject to a complex legal battle. Last year, the highest court judge had to address the question whether the Jehovah's Witness' faith of a fourteen year-old boy is truly his own faith.

It reminds me, by the way, of the debate in Germany about Muslim refugees who convert to Protestantism. Such conversions may, of course, be the outcome of a genuine change of faith. But they can also be pragmatically motivated. Conversion has a favourable effect on the asylum application. The persecution of converts in the country of origin, means that they will more easily receive asylum in Germany. How is one to establish whether a refugee has really changed his religion, whether his conversion is sincere?

Transposed to less dramatic issues in child-raising, education and youth care: What are we to do with children who don't see their own ADHD as problem behavior and don't want to take Ritalin. Is it their sincere conviction? Does it deserve respect? How do we determine such things? And what are we to do with children who refuse to see their autism as a disorder, but understand it in terms of neurodiversity and therefore see no need for treatment? Is that their sincere conviction? Is it deserving of respect? How do we determine such things? And what about children who don't believe their deafness is a handicap, but understand it in terms of cultural diversity (deaf people as a linguistic minority: sign language-speaking) and hence have no wish to be taught lip reading? Is that their sincere conviction? Is it deserving of respect? How are we to determine this? All these cases and problems show once again that it requires knowledge and insight to adequately determine judge when and when not tolerance is appropriate.

Tolerance has a knowledge dimension. The dispositional and emotional dimension is strongly determined by genetic, familial and contextual factors. It is unclear what education might contribute to this. Education can definitely contribute to the knowledge dimension.

What are the consequences for promoting tolerance in education? This is one of the questions in our research on citizenship education. But it seems obvious that the practice of promoting tolerance asks more than a specific school culture, school climate and composition of student population, and also more than certain manners of classroom management, certain didactics and the like. Knowledge is an important dimension. So we have to look at curriculum and subject matter.

For the context of our approach to Citizenship Education:

*Piet van der Ploeg (2016). Dewey versus "Dewey" on democracy and education. *Education, Citizenship and Social Justice*, 2016, 11(2), in press.

*Piet van der Ploeg & Laurence Guérin (2016). Questioning participation and solidarity as goals of citizenship education. *Critical Review: A Journal of Politics & Society*, vol. 28, no. 2, in press.

*<https://xs4all.academia.edu/PietvanderPloeg>